



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO AUSTRIA
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 850th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE FOUNDATION OF THE SHRINE OF MARIAZELL

MEETING WITH VOLUNTEER ASSOCIATIONS

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Wiener Konzerthaus, Vienna

Sunday, 9 September 2007

*Mr President,
Archbishop Kothgasser,
Dear Volunteers and Honorary Members
of the different Charitable Agencies in Austria,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
and above all: Dear young friends,*

I have looked forward with particular joy to this meeting, which takes place near the end of my visit to Austria. And naturally there is the further joy of having heard not only a marvellous piece by Mozart, but also, unexpectedly, the "Vienna Choir Boys". Heartfelt thanks! It is good to meet people who are trying to give a face to the Gospel message in our communities; to see people, young and old, who concretely express in Church and society the love which we, as Christians, must be overwhelmed: the love of God which enables us to see others as our neighbours, our brothers and sisters! I am filled with gratitude and admiration when I think of the generous volunteer work done in this country by so many people of all ages. To all of you, and to those who hold honorary and unremunerated positions in Austria, I would like today to express my special appreciation. I thank you, Mr. President, you, Archbishop Kothgasser, and, above all, you, the

young people representing volunteer workers in Austria, for your beautiful and profound words of greeting.

Thanks be to God, many people consider it an honour to engage in volunteer service to individuals, groups and organizations, or to respond to specific needs concerning the common good. This kind of involvement is first of all an occasion for personal growth and for active and responsible participation in the life of society. The willingness to take up volunteer work can have various motivations. Frequently it is simply born of a desire to do something meaningful and helpful, and out of a desire for new experiences. Young people rightly and naturally also discover in volunteer work a source of joy, positive experiences and genuine camaraderie in carrying out a worthwhile project alongside others. Often these personal ideas and initiatives are linked to a practical love of neighbour; the individual thus becomes part of a wider community of support. I would like to express my gratitude and heartfelt thanks for the remarkable “culture of volunteerism” existing in Austria. I wish to thank every woman and every man, all the young people and all the children – the volunteer work carried out by children is at times impressive; we need only think of the activity of the *Sternsinger* at Christmastime; you, dear Archbishop, have already mentioned this. I would also like to express gratitude for the efforts, large and small, which often go unnoticed. Thank you and *Vergelt's Gott* [May God reward you!] for your contribution to building a “civilization of love” at the service of everyone and the betterment of the nation. Love of neighbour is not something that can be delegated; the State and the political order, even with their necessary concern for the provision of social services, – as you, Mr President, have said – cannot take its place. Love of neighbour always demands a voluntary personal commitment, and the State, of course, can and must provide the conditions which make this possible. Thanks to such involvement, assistance maintains a human dimension and does not become depersonalized. Volunteers like yourselves, then, are not “stopgaps” in the social fabric, but people who truly contribute to giving our society a humane and Christian face.

Young people especially long to have their abilities and talents “awakened and discovered”. Volunteers want to be asked, they want to be told: “I need you” - “You can do it!” How good it feels to hear words like these! In their human simplicity, they unwittingly point us to the God who has called each of us into being and given us a personal task, the God who needs each of us and awaits our response. Jesus called men and women, and gave them the courage needed to embark on a great undertaking, one to which, by themselves, they would never have dared to aspire. To allow oneself to be called, to make a decision and then to set out on a path - without the usual questions about whether it is useful or profitable - this attitude will naturally bring healing in its wake. The saints have shown us this path by their lives. It is a fascinating and thrilling path, a path of generosity and, nowadays, one which is much needed. To say “yes” to volunteering to help others is a decision which is liberating; it opens our hearts to the needs of others, to the requirements of justice, to the defence of life and the protection of creation. Volunteer work is really about the heart of the Christian image of God and man: love of God and love of neighbour.

Dear Volunteers, Ladies and Gentlemen. Volunteer work reflects gratitude for, and the desire to share with others, the love that we ourselves have received. In the words of the fourteenth-century theologian Duns Scotus,^[1] *Deus vult condiligentes* – God wants persons who love together with him. Seen in this light, unremunerated service has much to do with God’s grace. A culture which would calculate the cost of everything, forcing human relationships into a strait jacket of rights and duties, is able to realize, thanks to the countless people who freely donate their time and service to others, that life is an unmerited gift. For all the many different or even contradictory reasons which motivate people to volunteer their services, all are ultimately based on a profound solidarity born of “gratuitousness”. It was as a free gift that we received life from our Creator, it was as a free gift that we were set free from the blind alley of sin and evil, it was as a free gift that we were given the Spirit with his many gifts. In my Encyclical I wrote: “Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends”.^[2] “Those who are in a position to help others will realize that in doing so they themselves receive help; being able to help others is no merit or achievement of their own. This duty is a grace”.^[3] By our commitment to volunteer work, we freely pass on what we ourselves have received. This “inner logic” of gratuitousness goes beyond strict moral obligation.

Without volunteer service, society and the common good could not, cannot and will not endure. A readiness to be at the service of others is something which surpasses the calculus of outlay and return: it shatters the rules of a market economy. The value of human beings cannot be judged by purely economic criteria. Without volunteers, then, no state can be built up. A society’s progress and worth constantly depend on people who do more than what is strictly their duty.

Ladies and Gentlemen! Volunteer work is a service to human dignity, inasmuch as men and women are created in the image and likeness of God. As Irenaeus of Lyons, in the second century, said: “The glory of God is the living man, and the life of man is the vision of God”.^[4] And Nicholas of Cusa, in his treatise on the vision of God went on to develop this insight: “Since the eye is where love is found, I know that you love me... Your gaze, O Lord, is love.... By gazing upon me, you, the hidden God, enable me to catch a glimpse of you... Your gaze bestows life... Your gaze is creative”.^[5] God’s gaze – the gaze of Jesus fills us with God’s love. Some ways of looking at others can be meaningless or even contemptuous. There are looks that reveal esteem and express love. Volunteer workers have regard for others; they remind us of the dignity of every human being and they awaken enthusiasm and hope. Volunteer workers are guardians and advocates of human rights and human dignity.

Jesus’ gaze is connected with another way of seeing others. In the Gospel the words: “He saw him and passed by” are said of the priest and the Levite who see the man lying half-dead on the wayside, yet do not come to his help (*Lk 10:31-2*). There are people who see, but pretend not to see, who are faced with human needs yet remain indifferent. This is part of the coldness of our present time. In the gaze of others, and particularly of the person who needs our help, we experience the concrete demands of Christian love. Jesus Christ does not teach us a spirituality “of closed eyes”, but one of “alertness”, one which entails an absolute duty to take notice of the

needs of others and of situations involving those whom the Gospel tells us are our neighbours. The gaze of Jesus, what “his eyes” teach us, leads to human closeness, solidarity, giving time, sharing our gifts and even our material goods. For this reason, “those who work for the Church’s charitable organizations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, – as important as this is – but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern... This heart sees where love is needed, and acts accordingly”.^[6] Yes, “I have to become like someone in love, someone whose heart is open to being shaken up by another’s need. Then I find my neighbour or - better – then I am found by him”.^[7]

Finally, the commandment of love for God and neighbour (cf. *Mt 22:37-40*; *Lk 10:27*) reminds us that it is through our love of neighbour that we Christians honour God himself. Archbishop Kothgasser has already quoted the saying of Jesus: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (*Mt 25:40*). If Jesus himself is present in the concrete man or woman whom we encounter, then unremunerated service can bring us to an experience of God. Sharing in human situations and needs leads to a “new” and meaningful kind of togetherness. In this way, volunteer work can help bring people out of their isolation and make them part of a community.

To conclude, I would like to mention the power of prayer and its importance for everyone engaged in charitable work. Praying to God sets us free from ideologies or a sense of hopelessness in the face of endless needs. “Even in their bewilderment and failure to understand the world about them, Christians continue to believe in the ‘goodness and loving kindness of God’ (*Tit 3:4*). Immersed like everyone else in the dramatic complexity of historical events, they remain unshakably certain that God is our Father and loves us, even when his silence remains incomprehensible”.^[8]

Dear members and volunteer workers of charitable organizations in Austria, Ladies and Gentlemen! Whenever people do more than their simple duty in professional life and in the family – and even doing this well calls for great strength and much love – , and whenever they commit themselves to helping others, putting their precious free time at the service of man and his dignity, their hearts expand. Volunteers do not understand the term “neighbour” in the literal meaning of the word; for them, it includes those who are far away, those who are loved by God, and those who, with our help, need to experience the work of redemption accomplished by Christ. The other, whom the Gospel calls our “neighbour”, thus becomes our privileged partner as we face the pressures and constraints of the world in which we live. Anyone who takes seriously the “priority” of his neighbour lives and acts in accordance with the Gospel and shares in the mission of the Church, which always looks at the whole person and wants everyone to experience the love of God. Dear volunteers, the Church fully supports your service. I am convinced that the volunteers of Austria will continue to be a source of great blessing and I assure you of my prayers. Upon all of you I invoke the joy of the Lord which is our strength (cf. *Neh 8:10*). May God in his goodness be ever close to you and guide you constantly by the help of his grace.

[1] *Opus Oxoniense* III d. 32 q. 1 n. 6.

[2] BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 31.

[3] *Ibid.*, 35.

[4] *Adversus Haereses* IV, 20, 7.

[5] *De visione Dei / Die Gottesschau*, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, hg. und endgef. von Leo Gabriel, übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Wien, 1967, Bd. III, 105-111.

[6] BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 31.

[7] JOSEPH RATZINGER / BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, New York, 2007, p. 194.*

[8] BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 38.

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